DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 588 PS 012 190

AUTHOR Martin, John A.
TITLE The Impact of Children's Influence Attempts on Conflict in the Family.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Boston, MA, April 2-5, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Change; *Behavior Patterns; *Conflict; *Influences; Interaction; Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; Prediction; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Child Influence

ABSTRACT

To see if mother-child conflict and mother firmness in conflict situations could be predicted from previous measures of the level of young children's attempt to influence their mothers, a study was conducted among 27 boys and 25 girls who were observed at 33 and 45 months of age. Information about the 33-month-old children's influence attempts came from two observational situations in which the mother was busy filling out a questionnaire and the child had nothing to do. Piloting of these two "nothing-to-do" situations demonstrated that positive and negative child influence attempts could be reliably categorized as belonging to one of six types, such as Hug/Hold (positive attempt) or Nag/Demand (negative attempt). At both data gathering sessions questionnaires presented to mothers focused on a number of hypothetical conflict situations, some of which were age-specific. Mothers were also asked about the frequency of and their typical responses to the conflict situations presented in the questionnaires. Multiple regression analyses were performed separately for boys and girls. Among the results, for boys high levels of both positive and negative influence attempts are associated with increases in the degree of mother-child conflict reported by the mother. For girls negative influence attempts are associated with increased reports of conflict, whereas positive influence attempts are not. (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED202588

The Impact of Children's Influence Attempts on Conflict in the Family

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
John A. Martin
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

John A. Martin

Stanford University

PS012190

Developmental researchers have in recent years shifted the focus of their studies of family socialization from a so-called "parent-influence" orientation--that is, an approach in which parental characteristics and behavior are studied as potential determinants of differences among children--to a bidirectional approach in which both study design and data analysis reflect the notion that children exert influence on parents' behavior as well as vice versa. This interest in the bidirectionality of socialization effects has led to a variety of approaches to the study of the family. One approach is to focus on situations in which one person is trying to influence the behavior of the other. Studies of parental teaching style fall into this category, and a great deal is now known about this type of parental influence attempt. Less is known about children's direct attempts to influence their parents. This paper reports a longitudinal study which examines the proposition that different styles of child influence attempts may have different developmental implications on family relations.

Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research In Child Development, April, 1981, Boston, Massachusetts.

Author's address: Department of Psychology; Jordan Hall, Bldg. 420; Stanford University; Stanford, CA 94305. The author is supported by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The Stanford Longitudinal Study is a large-scale investigation of parent-child relations from birth through first grade. Periodic assessments have been made of parents and children in a wide variety of situations, including situations in which parents and children are studied both separately and together. Data include observational information, questionnaires and diaries. Three separate longitudinal cohorts make up the Stanford Longitudinal Study: this report focuses on the final--and largest--cohort, using data collected when the children were 33- and 45-months of age. At age 33 months, 60 children were observed including 31 boys and 29 girls. At age 45 months, 27 boys and 25 girls were observed, for a total of 52 subjects. A great deal of information was collected at these two times. This report will concentrate on observational information about children's influence attempts and parent reports of the amount of conflict in the family and firmness in the face of conflict.

At 33 months, information about children's influence attempts came from two observational situations in which the mother was busy but in which the child had nothing to do. The first of these immediately followed several scenarios which involved intense interactive play between mother and child. For this first "nothing-to-do" situation, all play objects were removed from the room by the experimenter and the mother was given a lengthy questionnaire to complete. No instructions were given about what the child was to do during this two-minute period of observation.

After several intervening situations in which both mother and child were occupied in periods of play, all play objects were again removed from the room and mothers were given a one-page questionnaire along with a cookie in a clear plastic bag. Each mother was told to work on the questionnaire and to give the

cookie to her child only when the questionnaire was completed.

Piloting of these two "nothing-to-do" situations demonstrated that child influence attempts could be reliably categorized as belonging to one of six types. The first category, called "Request/Question", included child requests for information or attention which were non-demanding and non-coercive. The second category, called "Nag/Demand", also involved verbal requests for attention, but of a demanding, coercive nature. The Nag/Demand category also included constant repetition of requests, insistent-demanding and whining. The third category, called "Hug/Hold", included the child's own use of physical affection and non-coercive attempts to elicit affection or "cuddling" from the mother. The fourth category was called Tug/Interfere", and included any kind of coercive or demanding physical interaction with the mother which was judged as being designed to elicit attention or compliance or to prevent the mother's ongoing activity. Physical contact initiated by the child which could not be categorized as belonging to either of these third or fourth categories were designated as "Positive" or "Negative" touching. These made up the fifth and sixth categories. Interobserver reliabilities for these six behavioral categories all fell within acceptable limits. For our preliminary analyses, standard scores were created for these six types of influence attempts and the six scores were then summed, yielding a score for each child on Total Influence Attempts.

At both 33 and 45 months, mothers were presented with a number of hypothetical conflict situations in the questionnaires. Many of these situations were the same at both ages, and some were age-specific. For example, three of the items were: "You say it's bedtime and your child wants to stay up"; "Your child keeps demanding attention when you've said to wait"; and "You ask your

child to do something; he (or she) pretends not to hear". Two separate sets of questions were asked about these sorts of situations. First, mothers were asked how often the situations take place in their families. Second, each mother was asked what she typically does in each of the situations, with choices ranging from "Let it go" to "Insist". The first set of answers describing the frequency with which the situations took place were combined into a "Mother-Child Conflict" score. The second set of responses was used for a score describing "Mother Firmness". Both of these scores were created at both 33 and 45 months.

The aim of the study was to determine whether it was possible to predict mother-child conflict and mother firmness on the basis of children's influence attempts. But a correlational study would not allow us to differentiate between the two directions of effect: specifically, it is also possible that the amount of conflict and the degree of mother firmness affect the extent and manner of the child's influence attempts. To distinguish between these two explanations, longitudinal information on both conflict and firmness and child influence attempts is needed. A partial answer to the question is, however, possible with the data I have described. That is, it is possible to determine whether knowing the level of children's influence attempts allow us to predict a change in conflict or in firmness from 33 to 45 months. Such an analysis would give direct information about the child-to-parent effect.

The method used in these analyses was multiple regression. Specifically, both conflict and firmness at 45 months were predicted from the level of child influence attempts after having taken out (in the multiple regression context) previously assessed levels of conflict and firmness. These analyses were performed separately for boys and girls.

First, let me point out that there were no mean sex differences in mother reports of mother-child conflict or of mother firmness at either age, nor in the number of observed influence attempts made by the child in the two "nothing-to-do" situations. The long-term stability of the mother-child conflict measure was .61; mother firmness was stable at the .67 level. Multiple regression analyses showed that, for both boys and girls, high levels of influence attempts predicted an increase in mother firmness from 33 to 45 months. (Slide 1) This relationship is significantly different from zero for girls, but does not reach significance for boys. However, the sex difference in the multiple regression coefficients was nonsignificant, and the beta weight for the sexes combined was 0.25, significant at better than the .05 level

As shown in the second slide, high levels of influence attempts also predict increases in mother-child conflict from 33 to 45 months for boys. However, this does not appear to be true for girls. Here, the sex difference in the betas is significant at better than the .05 level.

In order better to understand the nature of this sex difference in the impact of influence attempts on mother-child conflict, a first principal components analysis of the behavioral influence attempt data was performed. Two clear, orthogonal factors emerged which explained 45% of the variance in the six behavioral measures. The first of these was labelled "Positive Influence Attempts" and included request/question, hug/hold, and positive touch. The second was labelled "Negative Influence Attempts" and included behavioral categories nag/demand, tug/interfere, and negative touch. The multiple regression analyses of mother-child conflict were then redone after distinguishing between these two forms of influence attempts.

For boys, high levels of both positive and negative influence attempts

are associated with increases in mother-child conflict from 33 to 45 months, although each falls short of statistical significance when examined individually. (Slide 3) However, for girls, it can be seen that negative influence attempts are associated with increased conflict, whereas positive influence attempts are not. The difference between these two betas is significant at better than the .05 level. Apparently, the positive beta associated with negative influence attempts and the slightly negative beta associated with positive influence attempts in this analysis cancel one another out when positive and negative influence attempts are not distinguished from one another.

In summary, let us ask: What do we know about the "natural history" of children's influence attempts and conflict in the family? In short, it appears that the history of mother-child relations in this area depends--at least in part--on the sex of the child. If we are willing to assume that our behavioral assessment of a child's influence attempts at 33 months represents his or her "modal" behavior in situations of this kind, it appears that, for both boys and girls, the more influence attempts the child makes, the firmer mothers become over time. This should come as no surprise: when a child frequently tries to "run the show" in interactions with his or her mother, the mother reports that she must become firmer when faced with conflict situations. Inevitably, children who expect to get their own way in situations in which mother and child goals conflict are "asking for" a firm response on the part of the mother. There is some indication that this relationship between influence attempts and increased firmness is stronger in girls than in boys. This may reflect different maternal expectations regarding the appropriateness of this kind of social assertiveness in sons and daughters.

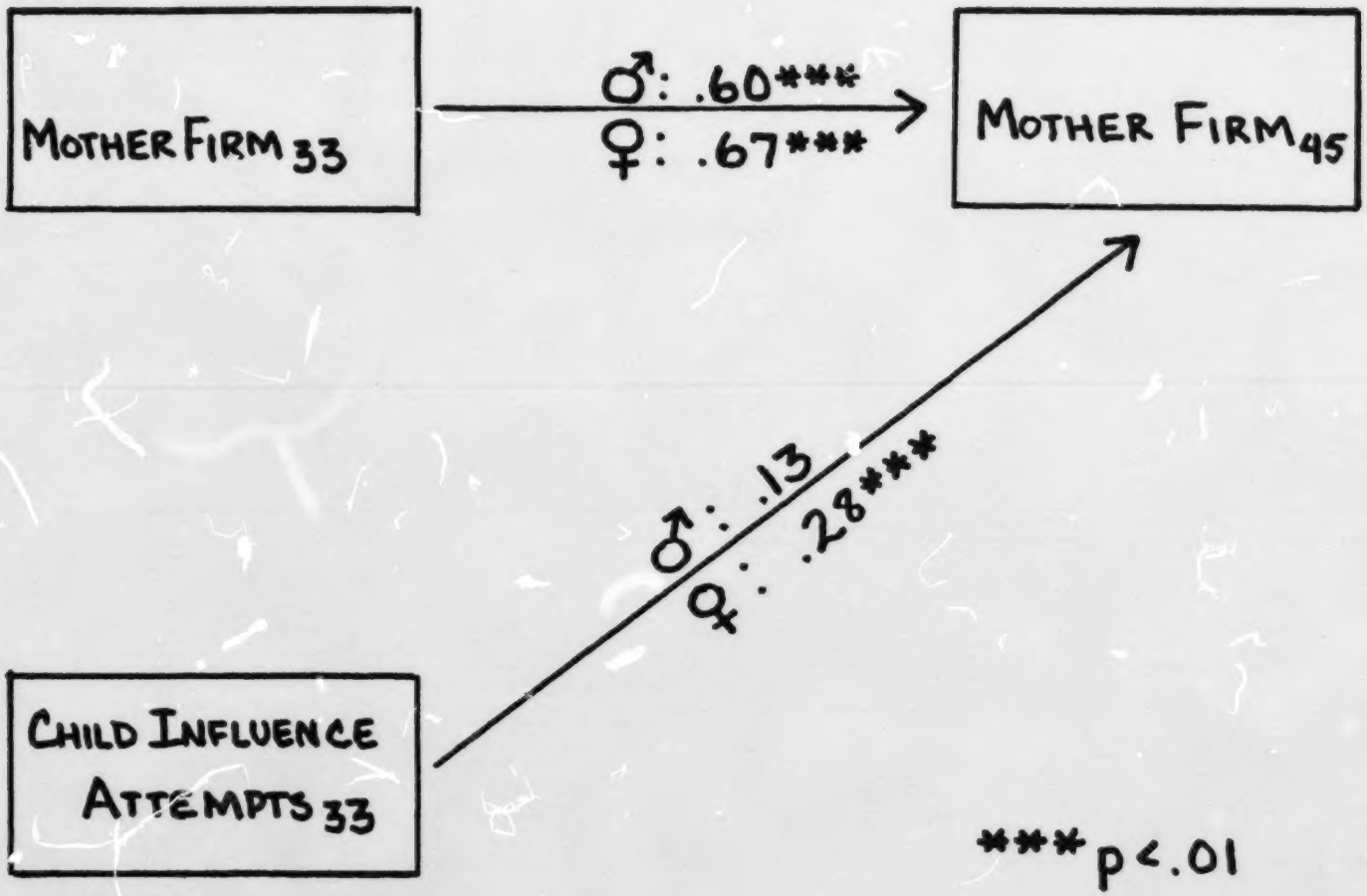
In addition, it appears that there is increased mother-child conflict when a boy adopts a style of attempting to influence his mother. This, too, should come as no surprise: when a child has his own "game plan" which has little to do with his mother's needs and desires, conflict is a natural outgrowth of the child's attempt to let his game plan be known. It is somewhat surprising, however, to find that this is not true in mother-daughter pairs. However, detailed analyses of the influence attempts explain this confusing non-finding.

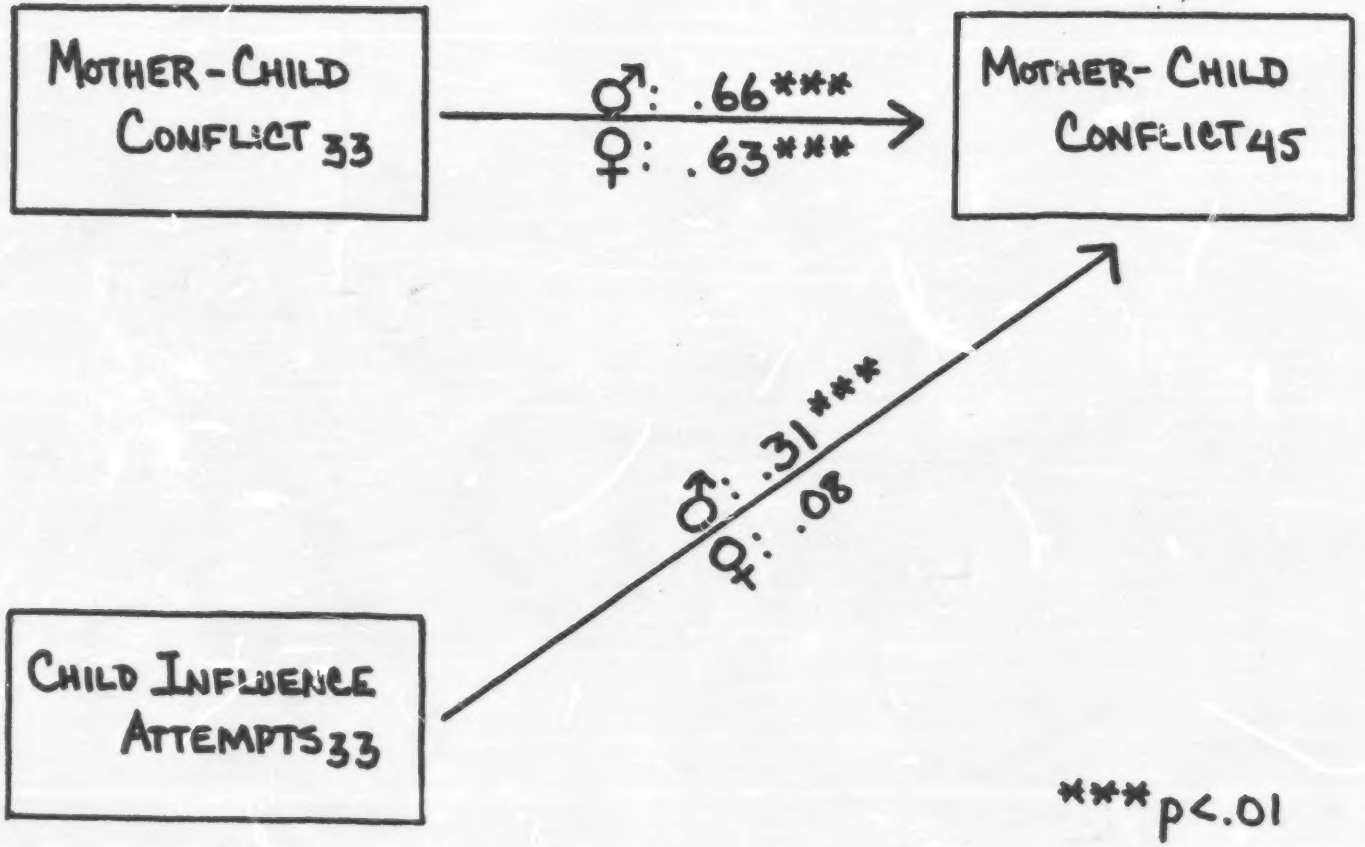
For mother-daughter pairs, it appears that high levels of influence attempts result in an increase in conflict only when these influence attempts are "Negative"--that is, when they are coercive, demanding and interfering. When a girl uses "acceptable"--that is, prosocial--means of attempting to get her way, there is no increase in conflict over time. Thus, it appears that mother-daughter pairs have begun to establish, even by this early age, reciprocal, differentiated, "adult-like" relations with one another.

There are at least two possible explanations for why this does not appear to be true in mother-son pairs. First, it may be that, for whatever reason, girls have an easier time than boys do in establishing mutually supportive, intense dyadic relationships with their mothers. Lack of differentiation in mothers' responses to the affective direction of their sons' influence attempts may reflect a relative lack of fit in early mother-son interaction. Even if this is true, it is not at all clear that this mismatch persists past the early months of mother-child relations. A second possibility is that the positive influence attempts we observed may have been subtlely different for males and females in a way which was not specified during the data collection phase. That is, it may be that an average Positive influence attempt was

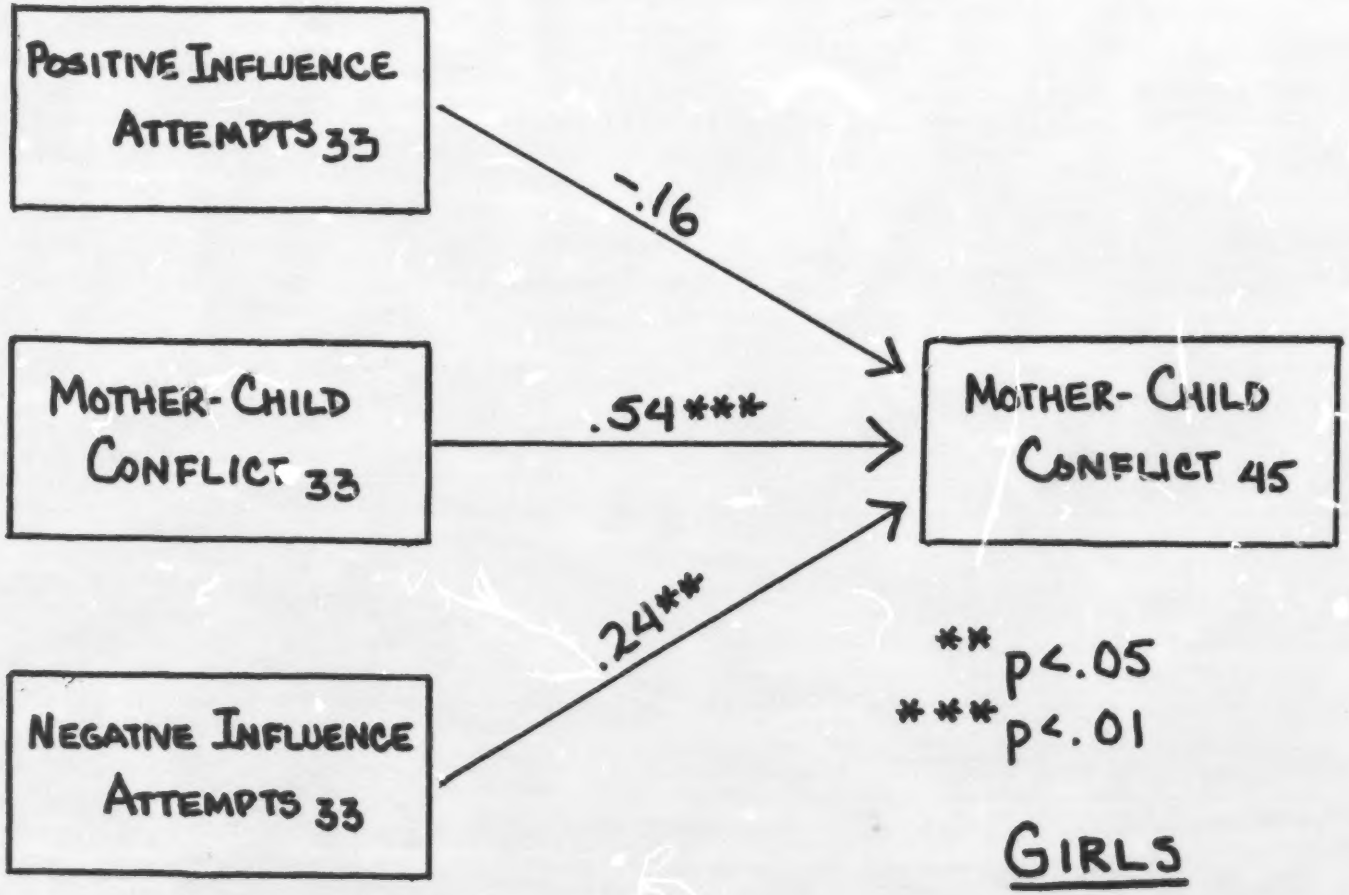
somehow "more Negative" when made by a boy than by a girl.

The important point to be made from the present study, however, is that children do differ in the degree to which they attempt to influence their mothers, and that these differences appear to have an impact on the future of their relationships with their mothers in the area of conflict. The present study showed the importance of differentiating prosocial from anti-social influence attempts, at least in families with girls. A more careful study of the nature of child influence attempts may help us better to understand the role of bidirectional influences of parents and children on one another in the development of family relations.


MOTHER FIRM 33
♂: .60***
♀: .67***
MOTHER FIRM 45
♂: .13
♀: .28***
CHILD INFLUENCE ATTEMPTS 33
***p<.01


MOTHER-CHILD CONFLICT 33
♂: .66***
♀: .63***
MOTHER-CHILD CONFLICT 45
♂: .31***
♀: .08
CHILD INFLUENCE ATTEMPTS 33

***p<.01


POSITIVE INFLUENCE ATTEMPTS 33
MOTHER-CHILD CONFLICT 33
NEGATIVE INFLUENCE ATTEMPTS 33
-.16
.54***
.24**
MOTHER-CHILD CONFLICT 45
** p<.05
*** p<.01
GIRLS